

Anxiety Disorders

33.6% of elite athletes and 26.4% of former elite athletes report symptoms of anxiety/depression. (1) By understanding that anxiety is common and by addressing it early, elite athletes can better manage it, and its impact on their health and performance.

Signs and Symptoms

Emotional

- Feelings of apprehension, worry or dread
- Feeling tense or jumpy, restless or irritable
- Anticipating the worst and being watchful for signs of danger
- Heightened distress after minor errors or lack of overall confidence

Physical

- Pounding or racing heart and shortness of breath; difficulty settling breathing
- Sweating, tremors, twitches, headaches, fatigue, and insomnia
- Upset stomach, frequent urination, and/or diarrhea
- Avoidance behaviours or prolonged warm up rituals

What athletes can do

- Recognise signs and symptoms (refer to the SMHRT) and seek help early from a team physician, psychologist and/or licensed mental health provider
- Understand the difference between helpful and performance-limiting anxiety
- Be mindful of triggers and stressors that can impact your anxiety
- Reframe anxiety symptoms as signals to slow down and re-focus, rather than signs of failure
- Practice daily self-care: this includes getting restful sleep, effectively managing stressful situations, and addressing symptoms of anxiety (practice calming strategies like breathing, cue words, routines) in training, not just racing

What coaches and support staff can do

- Recognise signs and symptoms (refer to the SMHRT) and promote early help seeking behaviour from a team physician, psychologist and/or licensed mental health provider
- Be mindful of triggers and stressors that can impact the anxiety of the athlete and help to manage those triggers/stressors to the extent possible
- Reinforce process goals over outcome goals
- Support consistent routines rather than changing strategies under stress
- Encourage exposure to pressure in a graduated, supported way
- Know your National Federation's written mental health referral protocols

Remember:

Anxiety is common in elite sport but it is also highly manageable. With the right support, athletes can learn to perform with anxiety rather than against it.

(1) This factsheet is intended for education and performance support. It does not replace individualised psychological care where needed. IOC Mental Health in Elite Athletes Toolkit, 2021. Other content adapted from NCAA and NAMI.